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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000962

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: PHILANTHROPY AND POLITICAL GAIN MIX IN TRIPOLI

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The August 20 celebration of the opening of the municipal palace in Mina -- a small, mainly Orthodox town in Tripoli -- was an over-the-top homage to Sunni billionaire, former prime minister, and current MP Najib Mikati. While some have noted Mikati's "philanthropic intelligence" in his expenditures in the north, politicians throughout Lebanon win loyalty and election votes with their patronage while undercutting central government and municipal development efforts that could diminish their personal support. Nevertheless, as Lebanon edges closer to spring municipal elections, such well-established patronage networks will likely play a key role. End summary.

OUTSHINING THE COMPETITION

12. (C) The August 20 celebration of the opening of the municipal palace in Mina was an over-the-top homage to former prime minister and current MP Najib Mikati. As the Sunni capital of northern Lebanon, Tripoli is a key city for Lebanon's most visible Sunni leaders, several of whom call Tripoli home. In the 2009 parliamentary election, a joint list that included Prime Minister-elect Saad Hariri, Mikati, and caretaker Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi prevented a real referendum on which Sunni leader is most powerful. While all three figures are billionaire businessmen in addition to politicians, Mikati has been linked to Syria, although contacts assess that his relationship with Damascus has cooled even as his brother, Taha, has remained close to the Syrian regime. Although he styled himself an "independent" in the election, Najib Mikati nonetheless supported Hariri's candidacy for prime minister. Both Mikati and Safadi are often mentioned as alternative candidates for prime minister if Hariri fails to form a government, and Mikati himself has suggested that he is prepared to serve as the first alternative. During the August 20 event Hariri, who was represented by Lebanon First MP Samir al-Jisr, was paid lip service, but Mikati, who financed the municipal center and the evening's event, stole the show. Safadi attended, but the crowd's applause for him

was muted by comparison.

ONE FOR YOU...

13. (SBU) A video tribute to the "palace" project highlighted Mikati's efforts to combine Mina's previously dispersed, dilapidated city services buildings into one convenient, modern center. Mufti of Tripoli Sheikh Malik Shaar, one of four keynote speakers, praised Mikati's "family of charity" and their contributions to the city. Shaar commended Mikati for his generosity and noted his lack of concern for publicity and the absence of ulterior motives in his service.

Mayor of Mina Abdel Qadr Alameddine and Greek Orthodox Bishop Yuhana Batach, representing recently deceased Mount Lebanon Archbishop George Khodr, praised Mikati on the spotlighted stage as well.

14. (SBU) Several contacts have noted Mikati's "philanthropical intelligence" in his expenditures in the north. Contributions such as the Mina municipal palace create longer-term allegiance than does the one-shot, pre-election paying of hospital bills and other fees that is common in Lebanese politicking. The municipal center will also serve as a gathering place for families, converting generations at a time into Mikati fans.

... AND ONE FOR ME

15. (C) Political boost aside, Mikati also profited

BEIRUT 00000962 002 OF 002

financially from his philanthropy. According to Toufic Alloush, head of Bab al-Tabbaneh NGO "Maakom" and brother of former MP Mustapha Alloush, Mikati purchased a large plot of land behind the municipal palace that will be converted into a public park. The park will exponentially increase the value of the surrounding property, including two adjacent historic buildings which Mikati owns.

HANDICAPPING THE STATE

16. (C) Although Mikati's extensive charity is much needed in Tripoli, his personal contributions reinforce the lack of government assistance to northern Lebanon's main hub. Sunni politicians such as Safadi, Hariri and MP Mohammed Qabbani win loyalty and election votes with their patronage, but they undercut central government and municipal development efforts that could diminish their personal support. Alloush noted that municipal leaders of both Mina and Tripoli are payrolled by Tripoli political bosses, allowing individual politicians to take credit for any improvements in the city.

COMMENT

17. (C) Government services are virtually nonexistent in Lebanon because of corruption, poor funding and political deadlock. In order for a strong state to emerge, the country's political elite will have to decide to work within the government system to improve it, not to compete against it from outside. Nevertheless, as Lebanon edges closer to spring municipal elections, such well-established patronage networks will likely play a key role.

SISON